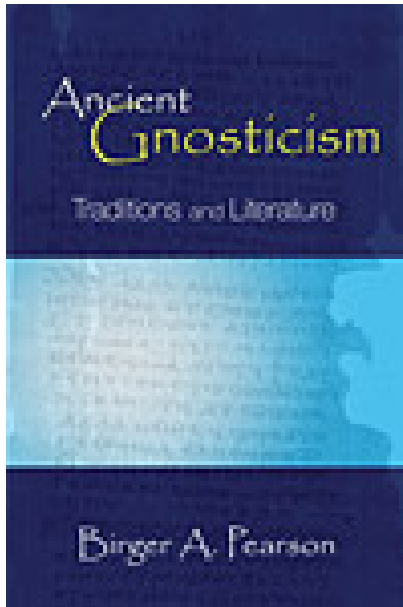


RBL 06/2008



Pearson, Birger A.

Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007. Pp. xvi + 361. Paper.
\$25.00. ISBN 0800632583.

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Birger Pearson's *Ancient Gnosticism* aims to fill a gap in the literature available on this subject, offering an *introduction* in the sense in which this term is frequently used in the title of academic volumes on the New Testament or the Hebrew Bible. Pearson offers a brief discussion of the name, summary (and, in some instances, an outline) of content, background, provenance, emphases, and date of each piece of literature usually placed into the category "Gnostic" or closely associated with Gnosticism, including the recently discovered Gospel of Judas. As a scholar with some forty-five years of experience in the field (as Pearson himself shares in the book's preface), he has an excellent vantage point from which to survey the landscape of the study of Gnostic literature and in particular its developments over the course of recent decades.

Pearson begins the first chapter by tackling the problem of *defining Gnosticism* and the question of whether that is even an appropriate term to use, having been coined relatively recently. Pearson emphasizes that, on the other hand, the term *Gnostic* (meaning one who is knowledgeable) is ancient and was used as a self-reference by the ancient peoples who wrote, read, and valued this literature. The terminology is thus not inappropriate, Pearson argues. The question of what Gnosticism *denotes* is then tackled, with reference to key features such as dualism, the splitting of the God of the Bible into two (a transcendent,

unknowable deity, and the lowly demiurge who created our flawed material world), and mythopoeia. Platonism and Judaism are identified as the key matrices within which Gnosticism was born, although no attempt is made to identify a more specific social context or framework within which it arose. The existence of Gnostic texts without any Christian features demonstrates that Gnosticism first arose independently of Christianity and is thus not a purely Christian phenomenon. Early Gnostic literature, in fact, ranges from works having no Christian features, through ones with Christian interpolations, to texts that are first and foremost Christian and represent a Gnostic Christianity, as opposed to a Christian Gnosticism. At the end of the first chapter, Pearson mentions six works from the Nag Hammadi collection that are *not* included for treatment in the book. It would have been helpful to readers, most of whom will read the book as an introduction to the subject, to explain why these particular works were chosen for omission.

The scholar introducing Gnosticism faces a dilemma when it comes to deciding where to begin. On the one hand, an introduction to the subject of Gnosticism today will focus much more on primary sources than was possible before the discovery of the Coptic texts from Nag Hammadi. On the other hand, primary texts often allude to and assume things about the authors, contexts, and audiences that can only be learned from secondary sources. Pearson chooses to move next to the accounts about Gnostic teachers and systems in the writings of various church fathers. Of particular interest in this second chapter is the discussion of whether Simon Magus was in fact the first recorded Gnostic, as some church fathers claim. Pearson accepts the value of Justin Martyr's testimony regarding this matter, since Justin was himself from Samaria, and his testimony includes details Justin had no particular reason to invent. Particularly intriguing, in view of the practice of baptism by Gnostics (even those without Christian connections) and the connection with John the Baptist claimed in Mandaean literature, is the fact that the Pseudo-Clementine literature asserts that Simon was a disciple of John's (31). Chapter 2 continues to survey individuals and movements explicitly identified as or hinted to be Gnostics in the writings of early church fathers. In some cases the identification is determined to be accurate; in others the very existence of a movement with the name given by the church fathers is open to serious dispute. Although there is room for concern that beginning the book (and many subsequent chapters) with a discussion of the information provided by non-Gnostic Christians might skew the evidence, Pearson does analyze each piece of information in light of the primary evidence, and the headings provided by this method do allow for a convenient categorization of texts that groups them according to features they share in common.

Chapter 3 deals with Sethian or "classic" Gnosticism, understood to be that stream of Gnosticism given particularly clear expression by the Apocryphon of John, which is the

first Gnostic work introduced in the chapter (and thus in the book). The key details of the basic myth (described also by the church fathers) are provided. In introducing each work, Pearson helpfully specifies those volumes in English where one can find translations of these texts, and thus his book can usefully supplement any chosen reader used as a source for the primary texts themselves. Features of early Gnostic literature that can lead into broader theological discussions are usefully highlighted, such as the “negative theology” typical of these texts (which can lead naturally into a discussion of *apophatic theology* and religious language in general) and their approach to the Jewish Scriptures, which at times combines literalism with a willingness to “disagree with Moses.” This section includes, along with its treatment of texts that have been available in English translation for some time, a discussion of the recently published Gospel of Judas. While the decision to include this work makes sense, in order to keep the book from being out of date before it was even published, it is unfortunate that the volume was not able to take into account the criticisms raised by April DeConick and others of the initially published translation and the potential implications for whether Judas is understood as a positive or negative figure in this Gospel. Professors using the book will, of course, be able to supplement it with other readings to fairly reflect the ongoing scholarly discussion.

Other topics of significant interest are also raised in the process of introducing key Gnostic works, such as the question of the relationship to other early Christian writings such as the Gospel of John. In his treatment of the Trimorphic Protennoia, Pearson mentions the similarity of ideas contained therein and the Fourth Gospel’s Logos Christology. The three options (Gnostic influence on John, Johannine influence on this work, and dependence by both on a shared background) are mentioned, and this is but one of many opportunities provided to relate these works to the broader interest in early Christianity that many readers will have. At the end of the chapter, Pearson emphasizes that there was no single group that self-identified as “Sethians.” These writings reflect not a unified movement or school but a stream of thought that may nonetheless have had many shared beliefs and practices (such as rituals of baptism and ascent), indicating that there were Gnostic *communities*. Pearson nonetheless eschews any attempt at reconstructing the social setting of early Gnosticism, and thus the focus is almost entirely on *literary* evidence for early Gnosticism.

Chapter 4 focuses on Gnostic biblical interpretation, providing a more detailed treatment of the ambiguity inherent in the Gnostic approach to the Jewish Scriptures. The influence of both Platonism and Jewish traditions of interpretation found outside and before the rise of Gnosticism is highlighted. The Gnostics presupposed a transcendent, perfect, unknowable God as ultimate. The question of how evil could arise (including the material world, viewed as fundamentally flawed) thus becomes all the more pressing, and Gnosticism can thus be seen as in many respects an attempt at *theodicy*. More ought to

have been said about the role of Gnosticism in first formulating the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*. After a survey of many of the defining characteristics of the hermeneutic reflected in Sethian Gnostic texts, Pearson concludes that “Sethian or Classic Gnosticism developed as a result of the efforts of educated Jews interested in making sense of their traditions. They did this, not by rejecting their traditions wholesale, but by applying to them a new hermeneutic, whereby their ancestral traditions were given a radically new meaning. The result was, in effect, the creation of a new religion” (132).

Chapter 5 is relatively short, focusing on Basilides and Basilidian Gnosis. Chapter 6 is on Valentinus and Valentinian Gnosis. Among the material from this particular stream of Gnostic thought are fascinating *letters* and *treatises* that allow us to see Gnosis articulated in *dialogue*, in response to questions, and discussed from the perspective of those who actually held these views, rather than by opponents. Interesting details from the texts are highlighted, such as that the Treatise on the Resurrection addresses what sounds like it could be part of a contemporary rather than an ancient discussion, when it asks whether the resurrection philosophically demonstrable (p.175). In presenting the Gospel of Philip, mention is made of the importance given in that text to *three Marys*. On the one hand, we are informed that the usual rendering, that one of the Marys was *Jesus’* sister (as opposed to his *mother’s* sister), is a hypothetical emendation (one that Pearson in fact accepts). This is rarely mentioned when the passage is quoted in the secondary literature (178). On the other hand, no mention is made of the reference to Jesus kissing Mary Magdalene, called his “companion” in the Gospel, which is unfortunate in view of the degree of interest in this subject in particular and the place of women in general in early Christianity (both Gnostic and proto-orthodox). The chapter helpfully concludes by drawing attention to the fact that the Valentinians regarded themselves as part of the *church* rather than a *school*, and Valentinus himself was the author of hymns used by these Christians in their worship.

Chapter 7 deals with systems that posit three ultimate principles rather than one. Included in this chapter is a treatment of “The Docetists” (196–98), which would more helpfully have been entitled “The So-Called Docetists” or in some other way made clearer that this is a treatment of a group given this label by Hippolytus, which differs from the common use of this term to denote *any* who posit a less-than-real humanity of Jesus. The same applies to the treatment of those Hippolytus refers to as “Sethians” (200–202). Also included in this chapter is the Paraphrase of Shem, which intriguingly uses the term *faith* rather than *knowledge* (although apparently in the sense of the latter) and takes an unusual stance in opposition to water baptism (as did the Manichaeans).

Chapter 8 is dedicated to miscellaneous Gnostic works in Coptic that cannot be associated with one particular group or another. It is interesting to observe how many of the better-

known texts (such as Pistis Sophia and the Gospel of Mary) belong in this category. Chapter 9 then moves on to the subject of Thomas Christianity. Although one can scarcely write a book on Gnosticism that omits a treatment of this subject, Pearson recognizes that, strictly speaking, the Gospel of Thomas cannot be classified as a Gnostic text (even though many do deem it such), since it lacks the distinctive mythological elements that distinguish Gnosticism from other movements and streams of thought. The treatment of the Acts of Thomas is dedicated almost entirely to the *hymn of the pearl* (258–61). Some mention of the fact that *Thomas Christians* exist in India today ought to have been included, even though their own tradition of Thomas's activity that led to the existence of their church is at odds with that in the Acts of Thomas. The treatment of the Gospel of Thomas is better and is at any rate easily supplemented by any of the numerous scholarly works focused specifically on that subject, should further information be desired.

Chapter 10 is dedicated to a consideration of Hermetism (distinguished from Hermeticism, the latter denoting the later Western esoteric tradition developed using this literature as a starting point). The chapter begins with language that I often find myself taking great pains to persuade students *not* to use. It asserts that the two quotes that begin this chapter (every chapter begins with a quotation) *are* from “a revelation received in a visionary experience by Hermes Trimegistus” (273), rather than specifying that they *claim* to be from such a revelation. On the following page, Pearson takes the time to define for his readers the words *ostrakon* and *Demotic*, yet he leaves the word *psychopomp* undefined. My guess is that the latter is no more familiar to many readers than the other two terms, and for some it may in fact be less so. The remainder of the chapter provides a helpful overview of the characteristics that distinguish Hermetism from Gnosticism strictly defined and discusses its connections with the Jewish synagogue. It would have been helpful in this context to address issues that will occur naturally to many readers: How should one envisage the relationship of this religious system to Christianity, when it has so many parallels to the latter and yet appears neither to have directly influenced it nor been directly influenced by it? The treatment of Thomas and Hermetic streams of thought, as parallel developments and perhaps streams that fed into Gnosticism, rather than being themselves Gnostic, raises the question why other similar tributaries (such as Platonism and Jewish interpretative traditions) were not themselves the subject of chapters of their own (although, to be fair, the latter two subjects are given significant attention in the course of discussions of related topics).

The eleventh chapter is on Mani and his religious movement. Pearson briefly describes its origins, its spread along the Silk Road, and its persistence until the seventeenth century in China. As with other streams of Gnostic thought, the situation changed in the early twentieth century from one of dependence on the accounts of others to the discovery of

primary sources, although unfortunately Mani's own extensive literary output remains largely lost. Two codices of Manichaean writings, including a collection of Mani's letters, were unfortunately lost during World War II. Nevertheless, the situation is still better than it was, and it is improving, as thousands of papyrus fragments discovered in Egypt are in the process of being edited for publication (295). Mani's teachings are fascinating, not least because of his syncretistic inclusiveness that even took him to India and embraced elements of Buddhism, and because of his artistic ability, which he used in service of the propagation of his message. Also fascinating is the social structure of the Manichaean movement, divided into the Elect and Hearers, with the latter dedicated to sustaining the former. It will be pointed out later in the book that it was the two forms of Gnosis that developed a hierarchical leadership structure, the Manichaeans and the Mandaean, that survived for over a thousand years while other streams of Gnosticism faded away.

Chapter 12 is dedicated to the Mandaeans. I was rather disappointed to find that the same number of pages was devoted to this last surviving Gnostic group, which is the focus of increasing amounts of scholarly attention, as to Hermetism, which is not strictly speaking Gnosticism at all. Be that as it may, this chapter (the last before the epilogue) manages to squeeze quite a good summary and much important information into its pages. From the very beginning, the possibility of a connection with Palestine and a subsequent migration eastward to Mesopotamia is raised. Key terminology is explained and its significance highlighted: for instance, the fact that the Mandaic language is a dialect of Aramaic, that the term for flowing water suitable for use in baptism is "Jordan," and that Mandaean means "Gnostic." The fact that two other terms have parallels in or at least potential echoes in early Christian literature (*nazoreans* means "initiates"; *tarmidi*, derived from the word for "disciples," means "priests") could perhaps have been highlighted more clearly.

A summary of Mandaean mythology is made difficult by several factors. A large number of texts have not even been published, and even many of those that have do not exist in English translation. Moreover, in those texts that *are* accessible, even within a single text, such as the *Ginza*, one encounters a diversity of myths and accounts of the origins of the cosmos. In contrast to the asceticism typical of Gnosticism, not least in its other major Mesopotamian expression, the Mandaeans do not adopt such an outlook: for instance, there is no denigration of marriage. Pearson doubts that there was in fact a historical connection between the earliest Mandaeans and John the Baptist, although he does trace them back to the same milieu (328–29). Much of the information the Mandaeans preserve about John, and about Jesus, appears to be derived from Christian sources. Pearson mentions the Islamic inclusion of the Mandaeans in the category of "people of the book" but ought to have included the usual English rendering of the term that denotes

them, “Sabaeans,” for the benefit of English readers who may wish to explore the subject further or have encountered the term in the Qur’an without knowing what group it referred to. The chapter concludes with mention of the plight facing the Mandaeans today and the surge of scholarly interest in them and their traditions.

In the epilogue, Pearson does not merely summarize the preceding chapters but also asks some wonderfully pointed questions, such as what it was that attracted people to Gnosticism in the ancient world and what accounts for the survival of some groups rather than others. Brief, preliminary answers are offered, not as though they are definitive, but as starting points for further reflection and discussion. The epilogue (and thus the book) concludes with a brief treatment of the new Gnostic churches that have come into existence in recent times, including brief biographical information of individuals involved in starting them and the addresses of their websites. Most of these, however, are eclectic and “in no sense revivals of ancient Gnosticism” (341), choosing not to adopt many of ancient Gnosticism’s most defining features. Recommendations for further reading, an index of names and subjects, and an index of biblical passages round off the book.

The book is aimed at students and interested others, although one suspects that the former are likely to be the more regular readers and users of this volume. The volume does not contain footnotes, which can be viewed as a positive feature in terms of making the material accessible and the book’s size manageable. In view of the most likely readership, however, the recommendations for further reading could have helpfully been several times larger. As it is, in the case of some chapters there is a mere single article that is recommended. Educators using the book will thus need to ensure that students know where to look for further secondary sources on various topics and pieces of literature. More extensive recommendations for further reading particularly on those subjects Pearson deliberately omits, such as the sociohistorical factors and context that gave rise to Gnosticism, would have been helpful. When writing an introductory book of manageable length, it is always a challenge to decide what to include or omit. My criticism is not of what was omitted but of the lack of bibliographical material directing interested readers to reliable, helpful materials elsewhere to explore subjects in more depth.

Despite whatever shortcomings it may have, this volume provides a welcome addition to the literature available on Gnosticism, on the whole providing a balanced and reliable discussion of the current state of our knowledge about a number of general topics, as well as about the individual pieces of literature that make up the available primary sources of our knowledge of ancient Gnosticism. The volume is intended to be introductory and inclusive, and it does a good job of accomplishing this aim. Pearson’s book is thus likely to see a lot of use as a definitive textbook in classes on Gnosticism in the coming years.